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S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

MONTHLY MEETING

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C L E R G Y,

ST. LAWRENCE'S CHURCH,

R E A D I N G,

On the 8th of APRIL, 1777.

By the Hon. and Rev. JAMES COCHRANE.

R E A D I N G:

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*To the Reverend and worthy Members of the Monthly
Meeting of Clergy in St. Lawrence's Church, Reading,
the following Sermon is humbly inscribed,*

By their most obedient,

And humble Servant,

JAMES COCHRANE.



S E R M O N, &c.

MATT. Chap. x. V. 16.

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye, therefore, wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

THE first Preachers of the Gospel were endued with supernatural powers, and "had a mouth and wisdom" given them which all their adversaries could neither "gain say nor resist." And yet we find our Saviour, in the words of my text, recommending it to them to form their conduct in general, according to the rules of common prudence, and not to trust entirely to supernatural aid, which would nevertheless be always afforded them, when necessary.

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We are not proper judges now of the propriety of such an injunction to persons divinely inspired ; for we know so little of the manner in which a power of working miracles, and other supernatural endowments may be conferred upon men ; that it is hard to say, whether they make so total a change in the person who receives them, as to insure his not making an imprudent use of them in certain situations.

If, indeed, we might be allowed to judge of them, from the use that is sometimes made of great mental qualifications, it is easy to conceive that supernatural powers, in the hands of an imprudent man, with his ordinary passions about him, would be in great danger of being frequently abused : and that where the first intention was to confer the greatest blessing, the obstinacy of mankind might work so far upon such a temper as to bring a curse instead of a blessing.

But this is more than mere conjecture, for we have a full and remarkable proof of this in the use which some of the Apostles proposed to make of their supernatural gifts when they were first bestowed upon them. " Wilt thou that we command " fire to come down from heaven and consume them," said two of the Apostles to our Saviour ? but his rebuke to them shews that a man might be endued with supernatural powers, and yet be liable to have it objected to him, that " he knows " not what manner of spirit he is of."

Nor is it to be doubted that the perverseness and wickedness
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of the world, would often provoke very good men to put similar questions, provided they were not endowed with that meekness and prudence which are so strongly and reasonably inculcated in the text, -

Most of the precepts of the Gospel and the behaviour of our Saviour upon many occasions are intended for the instruction and imitation of all his followers. For we find him, upon several occasions, acting, not according to his own powers, but as a prudent man in such circumstances ought to have acted. It does not, therefore, seem unreasonable to suppose, that, tho' the instruction appears not to have been unnecessary for the Apostles themselves, our Saviour, foreseeing how his religion would be disgraced by the intemperate and ridiculous zeal of enthusiasts, hath left this precept, both for our instruction, and likewise to shew mankind; how little pretensions those persons have to be thought his disciples, who neglect such rules of common prudence, as he enjoined his immediate followers, notwithstanding their extraordinary gifts.

As this precept is of such high importance, it appeared to me not unsuitable to the occasion of the present meeting, to consider how far a conscientious discharge of our duty has a tendency to form that character, which is so strongly recommended to us in the text. I propose, therefore, in this discourse;

First, to shew that the character of a Minister of the church of England ought to be a meek and prudent one; both from the
nature

nature of the office ; and the manner, in which the circumstances of the times oblige us to deal with our two great adversaries, the freethinkers, and fanatics ; and lastly, I shall consider what are the motives to which we may most reasonably ascribe a deviation from this character, in a Minister of our church.

As we belong to a church, where every thing is done decently and in order, this virtue of prudence must in some measure be rendered habitual in us. For we are not left to our own imaginations ; but are under the guidance of rules formed by wisdom, and confirmed by experience. That subordination of ranks, likewise, which is established in our church, confirmed by the practice of the apostolical times, and the propriety of which is proved by the general plan of God's government, hath a strong tendency to make our character a prudent one.

But, " a city set upon an hill cannot be hid." What the character of a Minister of our church ought to be is so generally known ; and the execution of our office places it in such a conspicuous point of view, that any remarkable deviation from character is immediately observed and spread abroad.

We may, in this respect, consider ourselves as sheep in the midst of wolves, ready to devour our reputations, and but too often, only for the common failings of humanity ; which makes the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove highly necessary for our imitation. Not that it may be
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thought necessary, to regulate our conduct, by the cavils of the four and of the envious. The character should be formed by frequent meditation upon the precepts and example of our Saviour, and those excellent rules for order established in our church. Our Saviour himself tells us, that "his yoke is easy and his burden light." We are not, therefore, to suppose that the austerity which, "hypocrites who disfigure their faces before men," endeavour to affix to the character is by any means an essential of it: for our Lord and Master, who was well acquainted with our infirmities, has encouraged innocent cheerfulness by his own example, by being present at a marriage, and even working a miracle in order to promote it. So that though we have the comfort to think, that from the models after which our character is formed, it may pretend to come nearer to perfection than any other, yet it leaves us free to partake of all the innocent enjoyments that man is heir to. But with all these allowances, if we would pass through the world blameless, daily occurrences will afford us sufficient opportunities of putting in practice the virtues of meekness and prudence.

But further, we shall find sufficient exercise both for our prudence and patience as we are connected with the free-thinkers. The fashion of the times has made it necessary to treat them with great formality and respect: for as the world thinks proper to rank them among philosophers; and freedom of inquiry being allowed necessary for the improvement of philosophy; we are obliged to class the freethinker among those, who have improved mankind by the arts they have invented;

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(as it is always in this character he puts himself upon trial by his country,) until we have shewn that his principles are neither consistent with sound philosophy nor true religion. All infidels, therefore, who pretend to reason, must have a formal answer; and this seems to be a burden laid upon us by the fashion of the times, and with which the prudence recommended in the text requires us to comply. For we have no positive precept directly to this purpose in scripture. We are required, indeed, to give an answer to every one who asks us a reason of the hope which is in us: but this implies no more than to be able to give a rational and consistent account, of our belief upon our own principles. For if a man take the liberty to prescribe principles to me, and then require my belief, it may so happen that I can believe nothing consistently. This liberty which the infidels have taken, has laid us under the necessity not only of proving that we ourselves are right, but that our adversaries are ignorant both of the natural and moral scheme of God's government. Here the wisdom of the serpent becomes absolutely necessary, for turning their own weapons against them, and entangling them in their own snares; and yet this must be done in the spirit of meekness otherwise we shall be treated as bigots and our works consigned over to oblivion and contempt. This obliges us to pay a great many of them a much higher compliment than they deserve, when we raise them above the unthinking multitude. For a talent of making objections does not seem a sufficient qualification to entitle them to our observation; as objections will always bear proportion to mens ignorance of the subject which they propose to examine: and that our freethinkers are remarkably

remarkably ignorant of the nature, the design and evidence of the Christian religion and what is more surprizing of the very contents of the Bible itself, may be very easily collected from their writings.

Surely, it must proceed from the infirmity of our nature and a consciousness of our own demerit, that we have so strong an inclination to be prying into the weak side of things: but this infirmity enjoys itself particularly in the suspicion of faults in what is most excellent; and it is only this that can give a temporary reputation to such ignorance and absurdity as we meet with in the writings of freethinkers. Certainly a common man, writing upon a common subject, never could have shewn his face as an author, after such a blunder as the first infidel writer of this kingdom was guilty of. * The noble author, it seems, had some scruples of conscience concerning the public utility of his book; and therefore, very consistently and devoutly prays to God to give him a revelation, as an attestation of the propriety of publishing a book to prove, that a revelation was impossible: but what is most extraordinary, we find that this very prayer was heard and the revelation granted. And it is but reasonable to suppose, that, as we have never since heard of the least scruple upon this head from any of the fraternity, that they have trusted the propriety and utility of their publications upon the credit of this first revelation.

* Lord Herbert.

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I have said, that they commence Deists before they have read the Gospels, and, I think, if we attend to some of the objections of another noble author, * that this accusation will amount to more than a bare suspicion.

He proposes ridicule as a test of truth, and thinks if Christianity had been tried by this standard, its votaries would have been ashamed of it. But if this author's wit and humour had been as great as he himself imagined them to be, I suppose he would have found it very difficult to add any ridiculous circumstances, to the crown of thorns, the reed for a sceptre, the purple robe, the bowing the knee and other ensigns of mock majesty, which were used to make our Saviour ridiculous, as professing himself a king.

In short, if this author had condescended to read the history, he would have found that the most prudential measures were taken to render the scheme of Christianity abortive upon the supposition, that the founder of it was an impostor. He was exposed to contempt and ridicule, and put to an ignominious death; the prediction of his resurrection was recollected, and every precaution taken, by appointing soldiers to watch the sepulchre, to try the event of this prediction. But the freethinkers of Jerusalem rested very well satisfied with the evidence given by the guards to a fact which happened, according to their own account, when they were asleep; and our freethinkers readily give credit to the same testimony.

* Lord Shaftsbury.

Even to be obliged to study such writings, which every Minister of our church is supposed to do, much more to answer them, must be a sufficient trial of our patience; but to be brought to speak of the authors with any temper, can proceed only from that prudence which the circumstances of the times require.

But one comfort we enjoy amidst all this vexation, that the vigilance and prudence of the church, has been able to baffle all their attempts, and to refute them fairly upon their own principles. And from the necessity they have been under of changing their ground so often, it is easy to see that they have but an indifferent footing. For they have shifted from the dignity of virtue to the utility of vice; from the formality of reasoning to the freedom of wit and humour; and from the grossness of materialism to the refinements of metaphysics.

I know not what other weapons they may have in store; but the effects of those produced already, have been only a more careful examination of the principles of religion, from which we have the satisfaction to find, that our religion stands upon a foundation which their engines can never reach. The fable taken from a profane writer, and applied to them by a learned Prelate of our church, seems so well to express the nature of their employment, and the success with which it has been attended, that I cannot help quoting it. Speaking of the *Egyptians*, he tells us, that "at what time their Deity, the Nile, returns into his antient channel, and the husbandman hath

“ committed the good seed to the opening glebe, it was their
 “ custom to turn in whole droves of swine, to range, to tram-
 “ ple, root up, and destroy at pleasure. When, on the issue,
 “ it was seen, that all their malice and greediness had effected,
 “ was only this; that the seed took better root, incorporated
 “ more kindly with the soil; and at length shot up in a more
 “ luxuriant and abundant harvest.”

I come now to consider the fanatic. Fanaticism exhibits such
 egregious instances of folly and madness, as must raise to the
 highest pitch both our pity and indignation; and a Minister who
 is in earnest about the discharge of his duty, and has to deal with
 fanatics, will find it very difficult to behave towards them, with
 that prudence and meekness, which the text requires: for that
 prudent and consistent character, which is formed by an imitation
 of our Saviour, an attention to the precepts of the Gospel, and an
 observance of the rules prescribed by the church, suits but ill with
 the temper of an enthusiast, who scorns to be an imitator any
 farther than it answers his schemes; but sets out upon his own
 bottom, and gives commissions to his disciples, and the reception
 both of them meet with in the world is really astonishing. Could
 a man, unacquainted with these matters, believe any testimony
 less than that of his senses, if he were told, that in this kingdom,
 which has produced the greatest divines and philosophers, and
 where Christianity has been so long established, and where there
 are such numbers regularly ordained to instruct the people in
 the principles of religion; could any one, I say, believe that in
 this country an illiterate mechanic, with no other qualifications
 but

but a heated imagination, ignorance, idleness and self conceit, shall leave his lawful employment, and set out, with all the formality of an apostle, to propogate Christianity in this kingdom, and find himself received as a prophet, and listened to like an oracle.

But the dupes of this egregious folly never fail to let us know, that the apostles were illiterate fishermen. However, if they could allow themselves time to consider they will find that these itinerant merchants of enthusiasm differ in every respect from the apostles. For we have no reason to think but the apostles were very sensible men, according to their station, and we are very certain that they followed their lawful employments until they had a regular call. But still their being illiterate disqualified them for teachers before they had that deficiency supplied in a supernatural manner. And it is worth observing, that this qualification was thought so necessary by our Saviour himself, that before his ascension he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem before they had received the gift of tongues.

Nor are we to be less upon our guard against another species of fanatic, I mean the sly inquisitor, concealing himself under the cloak of moderation, who, if he could once establish his own tenets, would rule both the church and state with a rod of iron. He may be known by his earnest wishes for liberty of conscience, at the very time when his own writings and behaviour discover that it is enjoyed in the amplest manner.

When

When we consider ourselves as surrounded with these adversaries, we cannot help considering ourselves as sheep in the midst of wolves, and being sensible of the necessity of being wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

I come now to the last thing proposed, namely, to consider, what are the motives, to which we may most reasonably ascribe a deviation from this character of prudence and meekness, which the circumstances abovementioned have so strong a tendency to make the prevailing part of the character of a Minister of our church.—And I have not the least scruple to ascribe them to weakness and vanity.—Vanity prompts *such men* strongly to look out for some way of distinguishing themselves, for that is a principle which will not rest satisfied with a conscientious discharge of duty. But when they happen to have only moderate talents, any attempts to gratify this disposition in a reasonable way, will be to very little purpose. They must, therefore, look out for some other; and none offers a fairer prospect of success to a weak man, if he has but the qualification of “lifting up his voice like a trumpet,” than to turn enthusiast; and when a man has once chosen his opinions, he can patronise them for reasons the most remote from common sense, as the learned Prelate I quoted before, justly observes. “He likes them, because they are old; because they are new; for being plain and simple; for being sublime and mysterious; for being followed by the few; for being followed by the many; in a word, on a thousand other accounts, with which truth hath no manner of concern.”

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But we ought to consider, that when the tempest rent the rocks and the mountains, the Lord was not in the tempest; but in the still small voice; and that the wisdom which is from above, is pure; so that enthusiastic noise and nonsense are not the proper qualifications of a preacher.

I am sorry, my brethren, that the practice of the present times will not allow me to ascribe those enthusiastic ravings, which so much disgrace our sacred profession, to any better motives; and that so many preachers of the Gospel, should know so little what manner of spirit they should be of, as to "deal damnation round the land" on every one who differs in opinion from them. Let it be the earnest endeavour, therefore, of every one of us, instead of looking out for the means of distinguishing himself among the multitude and rabble, by a patient and prudent continuance in moderation, to seek for glory, honour, and immortality.

Now to God, the Father; to God, the Son; and to God, the Holy Ghost; be ascribed all glory, honour, and praise, now and for evermore. *Amen.*

But we ought to consider, that when the trumpet rent the rocks
and the mountains, the Lord was not in the temple; but in
the still small voice; and that the wisdom which is from above,
is pure; so that enthusiastic noise and rantings are not the
proper qualifications of a preacher.

I am sorry, my brethren, that the practice of the present
times will not allow me to state those enthusiastic ravings,
which so much disgrace our sacred profession, to any better
motives; and that to many preachers of the Gospel, should
know so little what manner of spirit they should be of, as to
"deal damnation round the land," on every one who differs
in opinion from them. Let it be the earnest endeavor, there-
fore, of every one of us, instead of looking out for the means
of distinguishing himself among the multitude and rabble, by a
proud and arrogant countenance in moderation, to look for
glory, honesty, and integrity.



Now to God, the Father; to God, the Son; and to God,
the Holy Ghost; be ascribed all glory, honor,
and praise, now and for evermore. Amen.